Institutional work through empathic engagement

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A B S T R A C T

A growing body of literature examines how actors engage with institutions and how they prompt institutional change and evolution. This article takes stock of this knowledge and contributes an affective dimension to the study of how institutional entrepreneurs achieve momentum and field-level impact. The article views institutional work as relational agency and conceptualises *empathic engagement* as a way for institutional entrepreneurs to relate affectively to other actors and induce cooperation. We demonstrate how empathic engagement by institutional entrepreneurs can nurture communities of practice that co-create change in institutional fields. Our argument hinges on the actors' affective investment and advances the less developed non-cognitive dimension of institutional work. By integrating empathic engagement into institutional entrepreneurship, we demonstrate how institutional entrepreneurs nurture their ability to engage and cooperate with others to diffuse particular values through institutional work. This integration focuses on the way of knowing generated through empathic engagement: the ability to bring about a consensus by creating frames of reference and identities that others are enchanted by and subscribe to, as opposed to using coercive mechanisms.

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1. Introduction

The concept of the institutional entrepreneur was introduced into the institutional literature by DiMaggio (1988), and defined as an individual with enough resources and self-interest to pursue institutional change as a strategic response to structural pressures. In order to develop a situated understanding of the effect of actions on institutions, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006, p. 215) later introduced the concept of institutional work, defined as 'the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions'. Institutional work can be considered the manifestation of intersubjective agency, 'an ongoing process of development (change, emergence) within an already existing context of relationship' (Grossberg, 1982, p. 220).

Most empirical research has viewed institutional work as materialising through the interaction of coercive mechanisms such as regulatory work (e.g. Slager, Gond, & Moon, 2012) or the imposition of mental models or moral standards (e.g. Moisander, Hristo, & Fahy, 2016) against various forms of resistance (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Another perspective, which emerged from the symbolic interactionist view of action, conceptualises institutional work as a collaborative or even collective form of agency (Raelin, 2016) achieved through the provision of identities and cultural frames laden with values that enchant and captivate actors and induce them to subscribe to the proposed institutional order (Fligstein, 2001; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012; Suddaby, Ganzin, & Minkus, 2017).

Central to the symbolic interactionist view is the concept of 'social skill' introduced by Neil Fligstein (1997, 2001, 2013). Social skill is rooted in Mead's (1934) social behaviourism and has been defined as 'the ability to induce cooperation among others' (Fligstein, 2001, p. 112). The socially skilled actor seeks collective ends (as opposed to the rational and narrowly self-interested actor, who only seeks ends that benefit him- or herself), and induces cooperation by strategically leveraging knowledge of two factors: (1) the organisational field's condition and the positioning of groups of actors within it; and (2) given the field's condition, the types of strategic action that 'make sense' therein (Fligstein, 1997). Surprisingly, the concept of social skill is made empirically useful by specifying the 'tactics *real* socially skilled actors use to induce cooperation' (Fligstein, 1997, p. 398), and identifying which practitioners are skilled at a specific moment in time. This approach leaves aside questions of how one becomes more socially skilled, of how to 'create a positive sense of self that resonates with others', and of how to 'understand how the sets of actors in their group

view their multiple conceptions of interest and identity' (Fligstein, 1997, p. 398).

The strategic ploys described by Fligstein (1997, 2001) are based exclusively on cognitive abilities. However, to move beyond an intellectual understanding, to comprehend the world one inhabits and to be able to act and relate to others, one also needs to develop affective capabilities (Stets & Turner, 2006; Thompson & Willmott, 2015; Voronov & Weber, 2016; Weik, 2019; Wetherell, 2015). With some exceptions (Elfenbein, 2016; Gherardi & Rodeschini, 2016), acknowledging the interplay between the cognitive and affective dimensions of agency has been explored either as a coercive mechanism (e.g. Boedker & Chua, 2013; Moisander et al., 2016) or as significant only for individual agency (Klarner, By, & Diefenbach, 2011). Thus, there is still some way to go to understand the emotional aspect of social skills and to conceptualise the affective part of institutional work more broadly.

We advance the literature on institutional work by conceptualising the processes by which an institutional entrepreneur increases their ability to induce others to cooperate in institutional work. Departing from relational agency, we include the concept of empathic engagement and demonstrate how change can be generated through resonance and the creation of frames that appeal to others' senses of meaningful selves. The article aims to deepen our conceptualisation of the interplay between the affective and cognitive dimensions of relational agency. It reports the findings of an exemplar of a CEO's efforts to be an institutional entrepreneur and create and expand the institutional field of sustainable graphics in close collaboration with employees and suppliers. In particular, the empirical exemplar depicts a CEO purposively seeking to change the institutional field towards being more sustainable and engage empathically with others in ways that convince them to collaborate and change their practices.

The research approach is iterative. We entered the field with a focus on institutional work and institutional entrepreneurship. Based on the initial field work, we decided to focus on the CEO as an institutional entrepreneur engaged in institutional work in which he approached suppliers to institute field-level change. We searched for possibilities by which to enhance existing theory, with particular attention to the details of actorhood and the interplay of affective and cognitive processes relevant to relational agency in institutional work.

The remainder of the article is divided into four sections. Section 2 synthesises the theoretical foundations of institutional work, actors, the intentionality of agency, and empathic engagement. The resulting conceptualisation points to the interrelatedness between institutional change, relational agency in institutional literature, and the concepts of empathic engagement as an intertwining of affective and cognitive processes. Section 3 then describes the role of the exemplar and our methodological approach. Section 4 presents the findings of the exemplar, and the article concludes in Section 5 with a discussion of the article's contributions and implications.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Institutional work and the intentionality of agency

An institutional field comprises a group of organisations that together constitute 'a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organisations that produce similar services or products' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Institutional fields are interactive relational spaces in which actors make an 'effort to develop collective understandings regarding matters that are consequential for organisational and field level activities' (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008,

p. 138). Hence, within a field, factors at the field, organisational, and micro levels are interconnected via reciprocal relationships (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008). These relational spaces are not local, clearly demarcated spaces in close proximity; instead, a field takes shape when actors recognise one another and the structures around them, by which a process of referencing begins and collective rationality emerges.

Institutional work is conducted by actors who are purposive in changing an institutional field (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006); that is, who freely act within, against, or in support of an institutional field. Excessive focus on the agentic aspect of institutional work has led some researchers to argue that any action that impacts the institutional field, whether consciously directed towards the institution or just towards pragmatic accomplishments, should be considered institutional work (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). This argument builds around an empirical example of actors who are more concerned with realising their practical goals than with changing institutions. From this perspective, even when actors do not behave purposively with respect to their institution, their work should still be viewed as institutional — not by virtue of their intentionality and where its consequences unfold, but rather based on their objectives and accomplished work (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). While this argument has empirical merit, we stress the need to attend to both intentionality and effect; thus, we consider the conceptual border of purposiveness suggested by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) as necessary, and elaborate thereon below.

Smets and Jarzabkowski (2013) showed that actors do not need to have a clearly defined institutional aim in order to engage in agency. In this regard, actors' awareness of how their everyday actions impact on the institutional field might be questionable. However, this also begs the question of how one differentiates between institutional and other types of work. We might observe a practice, connect and configure a seemingly disparate array of activities, and link them to institutional evolution; however, in such a case every action, no matter how mindless, can be labelled institutional work. Such an approach limits our ability to investigate how organisations accommodate institutional change and create a space within which actors can nurture and enact institutional work. To avoid those limits, we ask the following questions: What resources do actors possess that allows them to engage in institutional work? What activities can they engage in? How might these activities impact the institutional field of an organisation?

Based on the above discussion, we suggest that the purposive characteristic should be conceptually bounded at least by one's awareness of one's potential as embedded in actions in relation to the institutional field. In order to be considered institutional work, actions need to address the sensitivity of these multiple relational spaces — actions being the expression of actors' conscious purposiveness towards the recursive and dialectical interaction between agency and institutions (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011). Here, agency is not merely a social performance or a relational configuration but rather an active structuring of existence (Sugarman & Martin, 2011, p. 238). This highlights the aspects of awareness and the reflexivity of agency, without succumbing to excessive voluntarism (Willmott, 2011). To perform institutional work, then, an actor must be aware of their actions' potentiality for evoking change, as materialised by relating to others and the structures around them.

This demands a conceptualisation of agency capable of accounting for the interweaving of actors' conscious intentions and structural conditioning in the enactment of institutional work. Battilana and D'Aunno (2009) addressed this issue theoretically by introducing the *relational view of agency*, to which we also subscribe in this paper. The relational view implies that institutional work takes place through interactions and relationships among

actors (Topal, 2015) but also that there exists an interdependence with institutional forces. Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 160) defined the relational view of agency asa temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).

It is the habitual, iterative aspect of relational agency that enables the reproduction of practices. Such reproduction is enacted through the actor's recognition of the idiosyncratic present context in which they are immersed, and of the multiple possibilities out of which they actively choose behaviour that is consistent with a specific institution. The future-oriented, projective aspect of agency manifests in institutional entrepreneurial behaviour that changes or creates institutions. Finally, the present-oriented, practical-evaluative dimension of agency is enacted in order to solve issues and 'get things done'. These dimensions of agency are intertwined and create a mode of agency that leans towards either the reproductive or the transformative end of the institutional work spectrum.

Within the institutional literature, the greatest importance has been assigned to the forces flowing within an institutional field, such as meaning frameworks (often reduced to their rationalisation), power relations, and logical structures. One critique of institutional theory is that it does not 'explain the "energy" needed to "power" human involvement in situations' (Weik, 2019, p. 233). A more profound understanding of the evolution of institutions and institutional actorhood would consider the emotions flowing within a field, and their related triggers (Voronov & Weber, 2016). Understanding the logic and emotional profile that people identify with and from which they derive a sense of self-worth as they take on different roles (Bar-Tal, Halperin, & De Rivera, 2007; Voronov & Weber, 2016) creates an institutional order that is easy to internalise.

As such, emotions are the subconscious undercurrents that stir the organisation from beneath the surface, potentially overpowering other forces. The strength of institutional work then lies in its ability to draw, capture, and direct such undercurrents. This presupposes that the institutional entrepreneur is able to develop a high level of self-awareness and self-reflection in order to transcend their sociocultural origins and produce new kinds of *relations and ways of being*, thus transforming themselves and enabling transformation of the institutions in which they are embedded (Sugarman & Martin, 2011).

In sum, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of, in particular, the affective dimensions of relating to others, and to conceptualise further how the corresponding agency unfolds through inter-relational processes in real-life practices. Thus, this paper goes beyond existing frames in the institutional entrepreneurship literature to conceptualise the processes through which institutional entrepreneurs nurture their ability to induce others to cooperate. When an institutional entrepreneur gains resonance and creates frames that appeal to and incite others' senses of meaningful selves, this occurs by means of both affect and cognition. We develop this in the following sections.

2.2. Institutional theory and actors

Perceiving the acting human being as at the core of organisational activities (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2000; Nørreklit, 2017), the organisational practices of others are by no means universally linked to 'macro-level' prescription (Barnes, 2001). When acting, the human being may be an actor or an adaptor. An actor is a person who, through their own intentions and reflections, creates and

controls activities in interaction with the environment (Nørreklit, 2017). Purposiveness characterises actors who engage in activities with an orientation towards the environment and the intention of being part of making the social world. The belief and knowledge system in which actors are embedded has to link to actors' motivational values. If these values are not linked into the system, actors might transition into a state of distress and counteract the system by taking dysfunctional action.

The nature of activities has implications for the way the institutional entrepreneur can relate to the other to create changes. In pursuing their intended ends, the institutional entrepreneur must work in relation to the other as a social construct that is produced by intentional, reflective, and knowledgeable actors. In routine situations, the relational idiom between the institutional entrepreneur and its agencies can be passive; however, when confronted with problems or new situations the relational idiom between the institutional entrepreneur and its agencies has to become active. These situations require the institutional entrepreneur to consciously draw upon relational resources that help them overcome entrepreneur—agency (actor—phenomenon) separation and become engaged in, or 'being-in-relation' to, the phenomenon (agency) to define and continue activity towards a desired end.

Understanding such a complex and fluid reality of other actors requires a special epistemic practice on the part of the institutional entrepreneur. There is a need not merely for conceptual belief and knowledge systems (preconception) but also for grasping the existence of active, creative, and dynamic phenomena (Bergson, 1914). Thus, the conceptual knowledge system can only capture static and unchanging phenomena. As human life and social construction mean change and creation, another type of insight is required to create and control human and organisational practices. Such practices remain oriented towards understanding the other to create something together. Relational resources are needed to induce empathy in the phenomenon (Knorr-Cetina, 1997). Institutional theory focuses on the social processes, and not the epistemic techniques, through which actors construct their relationships with the other. However, change can be instigated only if the individual engages in an empathic relationship with the phenomenon of inquiry (Trenca, 2016a). At the same time, understanding of the problem has to become enhanced and enlarged through the actor's visualisation, reflections, and conceptualisation of the problem and its context (Heron, 1992). Below, we elaborate on the epistemic practice of empathic engagement.

2.3. Empathic engagement: Nurturing one's relationship with the other

In our conceptual advancement of the affective element of institutional work, we take as our point of departure Knorr-Cetina's (2001) work, which characterises knowledge-centred practices in terms of a relational idiom between the subject and the object of investigation. This prescribes an actor with a personhood able to put him-/herself in an emphatic 'being-in-relation' with the subject.

To detail this relational affective dimension at the individual level, we therefore draw upon Heron's (1992) theory of learning and personhood, which describes the cognitive and affective micro-processes used to create different ways of knowing the world (Trenca, 2016a; 2016b) and thus highlights the importance of the affective mode for the enactment of epistemic practice. Later, Trenca (2016a) operationalised Heron's work in an organisational context; thus, in arguing for the suitability of empathic engagement and contextualising it as the affective dimension of institutional work, we engage further with these and related literatures.

In our context, the subject is *the institutional entrepreneur*, who is reflective and affective, while *the object of investigation* is the institutional field and its agencies, which carry the reflexive and affective aspects of these practices. The object is then characterised by openness, complexity, and the generation of questions, all of which are important in acquiring knowledge and engaging empathically.

As empathic engagement provides a *way of relating* to the other, it enables institutional entrepreneurs to develop the ability to tune themselves into the subtle backtalk of the institutional fields they inhabit and interact with (Schön, 1983; Trenca, 2016a). Backtalk comprises immediate, unplanned, surprising, and non-rational communication through the mere presence of human, material, or immaterial phenomena in the midst of action (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). Empathic engagement is a specific way of relating to one's inner and outer worlds, with everything they encompass, and also involving an ontological shift towards a non-dualistic view of reality (Knorr-Cetina, 2001; Trenca, 2016a). This corresponds to an affective way of relating sensitively and responsively as an interdependent being towards the other when interacting with them. However, there are different types of interaction. Empathic engagement requires both perception and dialogue; it has elements of identification, which is a process of the merging of self and other that allows the entrepreneur to work experientially rather than analytically, as they share the perspectives of and feelings with the other (Cohen, 2001). Empathic engagement fleshes out the relational dimension of institutional work by highlighting the dynamics between the individuating aspect, which establishes the actor as a specific focus of experience, and the participatory function, which situates the actor's actions in the wider context (Knorr-Cetina, 2001; Trenca, 2016a).

Empathy is a response that comprises feelings shaped by the way one perceives the other, and is mediated by cognitive processes (Cuff, Brown, Taylor, & Howat, 2014). Addressing institutional work from a relational perspective requires conceptualising the affective dimension in a way that allows us to grasp the individual's emoting and, not least, their affective relationship and engagement with the world (Heron, 1992; Trenca, 2016a). Thus, empathy is both cognitive, in the sense that one understands the other's feelings, and affective, in the sense that one experiences a feeling that is congruent with the other's experience. Empathy requires the affective mode of feeling, drawing on the mind's capacity to engage with wider unities of being and its ability to recognise its distinctness while remaining unified with the differentiated other. The affective mode of feeling differs from the mode of emotion, which relates to the individual's experience of distress that arises as a result of frustration or fulfilment of needs and values.[1]

The construct of empathy and its relationship with human behaviour and morality have attracted significant interest in multiple scientific areas, such as philosophy, sociology, and evolutionary-, social-, and neuro-psychology, spurring a wide range of sometimes conflicting definitions (for an overview of multiple perspectives, see Cuff et al., 2014; Maibom, 2014; Ugazio, Majdandžić, & Lamm, 2014). We see empathy as a distinct concept that differs from, but is associated with, the concepts of sympathy and compassion.

Sympathy is the intent to react emotionally, while congruence is what separates empathy from sympathy. Empathy is feeling *as* another, whereas sympathy is feeling *for* another. Empathic feeling *as* another requires an expansion of self-awareness. Through reflective processes such as reframing, suppression, or exposure control (Hodges & Biswas-Diener, 2007), one becomes aware that

one's feeling is a result of perceiving emotion in the other while retaining a readiness to respond to the other's needs. Being empathic means 'to be able to put yourself into someone else's shoes' while retaining self-awareness that 'you don't wear them' (Szalita, 2015, p. 106).

Empathy can be nurtured, leading to better contact with oneself, but the way each of us uses empathy depends on our own emotional and aesthetic attitudes and ethical values. Although empathy represents an important source of phenomenological understanding, such knowing does not directly translate into moral decisions, as in some contexts the empathic response might differ from the morally appropriate one (Batson, Klein, Highberger, & Shaw, 1995). Thus, empathy should not be confused with 'compassion', which is a higher-order concept that, unlike empathy, has a moral value and behavioural dimension embedded in it, namely the desire to help relieve perceived suffering of the other. Compassion is 'a distinct affective experience whose primary function is to facilitate cooperation and protection of the weak and those who suffer' (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010, p. 351). A person feeling compassion for another recognises the other's suffering, understands the common humanity of suffering, feels emotional connection with the suffering person, tolerates difficult feelings that may arise, and is motivated to act to help the person (Strauss et al., 2016).

In sum, we see empathy as a function of one's participatory affective dimension that is elicited in encountering another's feelings and emotions. Empathy is mediated by one's cognitive processes of recognising the other's state of being and evoking one's own imagination or experience to understand another's state of being. A core element of empathy is self-awareness, which allows one to have a phenomenological understanding of other's state of mind, thus resonating with the other while maintaining one's distinctness from them. Empathy, as an affective response, has neither a moral dimension nor a behavioural response embedded within it, though it compellingly informs one's behaviour.

In this frame of reference, institutional work is viewed as relational agency, while empathic engagement is a way to relate to others affectively in order to induce their cooperation. By inhabiting specific institutional worlds, individuals' self-reflections and personal openness towards and interaction with others can nurture the social skills of communities that are aiming to co-create specific institutional fields. Empathic engagement allows the institutional entrepreneur to transcend the institution they inhabit and, through their behaviour, infuse the field with an increased sensitivity to the institutional work, making it 'relatable' and increasing the potential for the work to become entrenched (Trenca, 2016b).

The next section describes the method we used to collect and analyse data. We then empirically illustrate the conceptualisation through an exemplar of an institutional entrepreneur.

3. Method

Our point of departure was the role of affect in institutional change. Methodologically addressing this issue involved both theoretical synthesis and an exemplar of empirics. The above literature synthesis suggests that institutional theory does not fully conceptualise the actor's affective response possibilities in their orientation towards doing institutional work, indicating a need for further theorisation with the concept of empathic engagement as a viable avenue. The subsequent process was one of symmetry, a two-way street of matching (Nickles, 2003) with repetitive and recursive movements between the literatures and the empirical material. The method employed in this study combines deductive and inductive processes to conceptualise the affective dimension of the relational dynamics in institutional agency and change.

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[1] This distinction is similar to that proposed by Weik (2019).

3.1. The case exemplar

Because the practices of institutional work are socially embedded, we adopted an in-depth single-case-study strategy in order to allow for consideration of contextual and relational factors in the analysis of empathic engagement in institutional work. Our approach has features of extreme, unique, and revelatory case rationales (Yin, 2003); however, in contrast to Yin's case selection rationales for single case studies, the exemplar methodology specifically entails the intentional sampling of cases that exhibit the central concept to a high degree (Bronk, 2012), an approach which is relevant to the current study. The rationale for exemplar sampling is thus that it 'exhibits participants who are rare … in the intensity with which they demonstrate … particular characteristics' (Bronk, 2012, p. 1). So, an exemplar rationale and a case selection rationale can overlap, but they do not have to. If we were to study a particular business that collapsed during COVID 19, a unique or revelatory case study approach could be used but it would not be an exemplary sample. Instead it is the intensity of the unit of analysis which interest us for the purpose of conceptual thinking. Usually, single-case studies are used to scrutinise exceptions and challenge or extend what is known. Specifically, the exemplar methodology addresses complex concepts in cases where the corresponding phenomena are particularly well depicted: 'We approach the subject of practical wisdom by studying the person to whom we attribute it' (Aristotle, 1962; as cited in Bronk, 2012, p. 2).

Conceptualisation of the phenomenon is central to our use of the exemplar method. Concepts consist of some kind of *content*, which is the cognitive idea embedded in a concept, widely explained by means of reasoning and its relation to other concepts (Nørreklit, Nørreklit, & Mitchell, 2016). The content's *reference* point to the things in the world that are assumed to fit the conceptual content. One may introduce concepts by a conceptual content, but also by means of the exemplar reference (Rosch, 1978; Wittgenstein, 1953). Thus, the exemplar can serve as the basis for abstracting conceptual content, but the content does not necessarily reside in the exemplar in a manner that makes it easy to detect. Thus, using a Popper-like critical approach (Popper, 1962), and to delimit the concept, we engage in an error-elimination process involving repeated reflective enquiry into the relation between the content and the exemplar. In other words, the conceptual development follows an iterative and reflective process in which we continuously improve the relation between the conceptual content outlining the idea of the concept and the exemplar. Thus, we combine dynamic theoretical development with critical methodological standards (Nørreklit et al., 2016; Popper, 1962). This means that our extension of institutional work by means of incorporating empathic engagement is jointly derived from the conceptual argument presented in the opening section and the exemplar.

The focal organisation in our study, GRAPHICS, is a first-mover company concerned with the scope and depth of adopting sustainability practices in the graphics industry. GRAPHICS, located in Denmark and providing mainly graphics solutions, was founded by its current CEO in the late 1990s. The organisation caters to clients such as international and intergovernmental organisations, including the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), as well as nongovernmental organisations and public authorities. GRAPHICS is strong in the areas of sustainability and CSR, and works continually with suppliers around CSR issues. GRAPHICS is certified in CSR (ISO 26000), quality (ISO 9001), environment (ISO 14001), health and safety management (OHSAS 18001), production of printed materials (FSC), and carbon neutrality. The CSR standard serves as the overarching approach to certification, while the remaining standards are placed within the CSR framework.

We consider GRAPHICS an exemplar of nurturing institutional change through engagement with suppliers for three reasons. First, led by the CEO, it engages in a high level of CSR implementation across its value chain. Second, the CEO has a goal of changing the approach to sustainability in the industry. Third, the CEO engages deeply with both new and current suppliers.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

In devising the data collection method, we aimed to ensure the descriptive materials contained sufficient detail on the ways in which the institutional entrepreneur, the managing CEO, thinks and acts with respect to his relating to others, his business model approach, and his aspirations concerning a more sustainable graphics industry. The interviews were arranged as interactive dialogues that at least partially enabled the interviewees more complex ways of perceiving and thinking about institutional entrepreneurship (Arbnor & Bjerke, 1997; Nørreklit, Pedersen, Prangsgaard, & Tuft, 1986).

Data were collected from a combination of interviews, observations, and archival data. The authors maintained contact with the sample organisation from late 2013 to 2015. The basis of the study is a series of 10 extended in-depth interviews with GRAPHICS representatives, and workshops attended by GRAPHICS representatives and the first author. This allowed for triangulation of the material. Formal interviews were conducted at GRAPHICS' premises. We also carried out three full days of observation to obtain knowledge of the work context and the CSR practices of both suppliers and customers. During the observation period, the first author attended a weekly information meeting at which the overall pipeline for individual projects and their progress was discussed, along with project turnover and overall focus areas, such as the importance of suppliers' prices in relation to competitors' prices, contacts in the customer base, and the ability to bring in projects in the fourth quarter of the year.

Concurrent with the observational study, a series of brief, unstructured, in-situ interviews was carried out. The first author followed up with informants via e-mail and telephone for further clarification. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and combined into a case narrative with qualitative interviews, observation notes, and *in situ* conversations.

A major part of the narrative that emerged consisted of an institutional biography of the managing CEO. Following the method of triangulating data from multiple sources to establish deeper understanding of a case in its context, the following archival data were studied: the personnel handbook, which covers core values; progress reports drawn up under the UN Global Compact; the code of conduct for suppliers in the form of the integrated management system (which combines all certifications); examples of printed work; examples of competitive bids; the company website; and a logbook of all CSR communications issued by the company.

Continuous reflection on the characteristics of the work practices depicted in the narrative focused our conceptual argumentation. In particular, the focus was on ways in which the entrepreneur related to suppliers and employees; how his purposiveness towards the institutional field was depicted; the characterised mission of GRAPHICS; and the role of GRAPHICS and the CEO in furthering GRAPHIC's sustainability agenda in consort with suppliers. The main area of interest was the entrepreneur's affective relational engagement with suppliers and his praxis of, and reflection on, the affective relational dynamics. The ambition of the analysis was to retain the intimate relationship with the empirical material achieved during the data collection (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

A general dispute in inductive case approaches concerns how to categorize and code (Ralph, Birks, & Chapman, 2015). One avenue is abductive reasoning, which combines induction and deduction. Starting with the empirical observation, it seeks to identify the theory that provides the clearest and most plausible explanation of the phenomenon. In contrast, we aim to develop a more detailed conceptualisation of the phenomenon. This may enable us to outline new conceptual delineations and structures and hence advance theory. To organise our thoughts, we sorted through the themes within the material and explored the relationships between them. As such, the data analysis entailed artful engagement with somewhat sensitive material.

4. Findings

This section describes the institutional work conducted by the entrepreneur to enlarge the institutional field of the sustainable graphics industry. We show how the entrepreneur engaged with suppliers and clients to create a relational space in which practice moved towards increased coherence with the principles of sustainable graphics. After elaborating on the context and business of the company, the concepts of conscious intentionality and empathic engagement derived from the theoretical synthesis are illustrated with reference to the empirical material.

4.1. GRAPHICS and its context

GRAPHICS presents itself as a total solution provider with expertise in graphics solutions including Web publishing, concept development, and printing. The company develops graphics materials on a project-by-project basis. Its main customers are international humanitarian and development organisations with a focus on CSR and governments, such as the UN, WWF, and the EU.

Projects are often subject to public tendering policies and announced globally to potential suppliers at specific times of the year. The seasonality of the market motivates fierce global competition among graphic design companies. Humanitarian organisations often focus on underdeveloped countries and need to minimise costs. To reduce costs and environmental impact, GRAPHICS maintains a network of suppliers both locally and near target countries (e.g. Brazil, Lebanon, Vietnam) with whom it partners. A project manager elaborated how GRAPHICS's business model incorporates these market characteristics:

We need to earn money. But we want to have the profile that we will go that extra mile, just because we understand how this type of organisation thinks … We were asked to make a bid for a British organisation, which had raised funding from environmental organisations for a project … I think they feel a certain naturalness in talking to us because we understand when they say: 'Listen, I don't know if I can raise enough funding.' An ordinary commercially, capitalistically driven corporation would probably take a stand: 'Well, can you pay for our services or not?' … We will go that extra mile to see if we have someone in our network that allows us to meet their budget frame. (Project Manager 2).

We might not have said no to customers, but our customers fit well with our profile, and we know how these organisations run. They are not making money [but] they have to make ends meet — and we know where they are coming from. (Project Manager 1).

These quotes reflect the core values that drive the practice of GRAPHICS, as emphasised on their website: *partnerships* with customers and suppliers; *sustainability* as manifested in products and processes; and *innovation*, specifically regarding technological solutions related to products and the production process. In thinking about their customers' profiles as organisations that often depend on fundraising, the project manager positions the company

in the role of a helper capable of accommodating the various constraints the customer faces.

To compete for worldwide tenders, GRAPHICS needed to build a strong and trustworthy profile through its use of quality and CSR certifications, including quality (ISO 9001), environment (ISO 14001), health and safety management (OHSAS 18001), and social responsibility (DS 49001). These certifications are integrated into one certified management system organised around the ISO 26000 CSR certification. The company is also one of the few Danish companies to belong to the UN Global Compact Advanced Level.

From the beginning, we have seen CSR certification as a general strengthening of the business and a natural extension of our values. (CEO).

With clients, we never discuss whether we can make an elegant print — they know we can. We talk about all of this: social responsibility, the environment and so forth! … The customer does not know what the certification is, but they know what CSR is, so we cannot take a single wrong step. (CEO).

4.2. Empathic engagement: Nurturing one's relationship with the other

This section shows how the CEO performs conscious institutional work that involves an orientation towards others, and how the CEO subsequently empathically engages with others, with a particular sensitivity towards backtalk.

4.2.1. Conscious intentionality towards the field

Since the founding of the company, the CEO has put conscious effort into contributing to the creation of a relational space in which CSR awareness can grow and the discourse of what it means to be a sustainable business can gain materiality. In other words, the CEO has sought to create a space in which various actors are invited to come together and build a community. The CEO is adamant in his focus on sustainability. Besides working to create organisational sustainability, he is outspoken about the impact he can exert over how the industry thinks about and works with sustainability through both his suppliers' network and the industry. The CEO has a clear intention directed to the institutional field. The desire to enlarge the field of sustainable graphics is based not only on business considerations but also on ensuring his own values are accepted.

The company documents its efforts to create CSR consciousness in a logbook of documents describing communication efforts:

The CSR log … gives us an overview of what we have done [for CSR] from giving a seminar, when the CEO gives a talk or when we have helped some of our collaborators. We also do this because of our certifications … Actually, the CSR log in itself complies with the demand that we should not only be socially and environmentally responsible internally … but that this should also ramify into our network of collaborators and clients, and even outside of that … [we log] when we contribute in one way or another to others gaining value from the work we do ourselves … We also see a lot of advantages in this from our suppliers' perspective. We recommend that they do the same thing, we do that a lot. (Communications Officer).

GRAPHICS was a first mover in the business on the environment … I think that CSR is the extended arm of all of our history … It is so challenging, that you need to get out and across your own desk. First, you have to tell them [the suppliers] what it is — you need to make it conscious. Some suppliers, they themselves have these thoughts, but others not at all. There's a big difference. (Project Manager 1).

The CEO of GRAPHICS, in his pursuit of enlarging and strengthening his suppliers' network, realises the need to base his

actions on a profound understanding of the relational space formed by GRAPHICS and its suppliers and customers. The CEO is aware of the tight interdependence between the various actors within the network and the fact that, in his attempt to develop new partnerships, he is acting strategically, engaging suppliers by not only invoking financial reasoning but also finding opportunities to create a trustworthy relationship in which they can help one another and grow together as a community.

We have a scheme in our [sustainability management] system about how the client can influence us and how we are able to influence our clients and suppliers. In the beginning of a collaboration our influence is limited because, if we came in and said: 'We would like to work together with you, and we think you can earn millions working with us, but we demand that you go through this entire process of certification', then most probably they would say: 'Ah, that is probably over the top until we know how this collaboration develops.' So, we have to start up gradually and see how things progress … and how we can support and help each other. In this process, our ability to affect our suppliers increases. (CEO).

The CEO has a clear orientation towards his current and prospective suppliers that he nurtures through ongoing communication to create trust and a common understanding of how the business and the industry can develop. At the same time, the relationship is a space for knowledge creation about not only sustainable printing but also the relational other.

4.2.2. Empathic engagement with the other

Creating profound understanding of the other requires data to be recorded on efforts made through observation and description. It also requires reflective cognitive processes, commitment, and the ability to engage empathically with each other and with the world in which they are immersed. Thus, the reflective cognitive process of the GRAPHICS CEO is not separate from the object but in an engaged empathic relationship with it. The relationship with the object shifts back and forth from a routine procedure to more innovative forms of practice.

The following quote depicts how, by drawing on empathic insights, the CEO of GRAPHICS developed a partnership with a printing house in Lebanon:

It's a long process. I think [we] spent about two years of preparation before we could actually do business with 'our' Lebanese printer house … Well, basically they do it in order to get jobs from us. You also have to bear in mind that we are dealing with someone where it is about survival. Beirut is halfway in war and actually they do not give a shit − they do this because they need jobs. Syria has stopped all jobs with Lebanon and so forth. It is about survival − they do not really think about the good story, you know, they don't tell stories. But they actually DO it [CSR], it is not like they do not do it. (CEO).

The CEO listened to backtalk and identified the driving energy of the supplier: the 'need to land more jobs'. Operating in a country affected by military conflicts and a poor economy makes financial survival the company's main raisons d'être, and makes CSR-type values less important. The CEO's empathic engagement allowed him to understand the limits of the supplier's reality and affectively connect with them and their potential to enact the value system he proposed. He was able to develop a solution that channelled energies towards achieving CSR values. Thus, even though the values are not internalised in the supplier's value system, the work is being conducted in accordance with the CSR value system, thus enlarging the GRAPHICS network.

Through the CEO's ability to empathically engage with the challenging reality of the supplier, he understood their situation and adjusted the process to motivate the printing house to commit to a rather long process that gradually changed working practices, even though CSR values were not internalised and the printing house had not yet received any orders − depicting the CEO's ability to notice backtalk.

Also drawing on empathic engagement, GRAPHICS managed to develop a partnership with a graphic designer:

I had a project where I had to hand over more responsibility to one of our suppliers, a freelance graphic designer … The client was super happy with this direct dialogue with the graphic designer … Towards the end, the designer said he could not exactly remember how much I had reserved in the budget, but that he had used a lot of resources on this task. What he really meant was … these hours, what to do about them? Although I wanted to acknowledge his work, I initially parked it because an agreed budget is an agreed budget. But then we talked about it internally and about who we are as an organisation … Then I described to the client what that extra time had been spent on … and I actually managed to get extra money from the client. (Project Manager 3).

Here too we see GRAPHICS listening to the backtalk of the freelance graphic designer: 'What he really meant was … these hours, what to do about them?'. Furthermore, through a reflective process with the other employees and the CEO asking 'Who are we as a company?', the project manager was able to develop an argument that convinced the client to pay extra. The acknowledgement of the designer's work depicts the willingness of the company to assume the perspective of this supplier. This also created a strong tie and a stable partnership that encouraged the project manager to immerse himself in the field, which meant also abiding by CSR principles in his relationship with the supplier. In other words, understanding the other's reality and connecting with it affectively creates the space for non-aggressively relating to the other even in situations of potential conflict. We also see the contours of the *subtle way* in which the project manager influenced the client: 'I described to the client what that extra time had been spent on, and I actually managed to get extra money from the client.' This shows he was able both to transcend his own institutional embeddedness and to explain the reasons behind the increase in costs. The manager understood that, for the practice and values of CSR to become entrenched, he needed to *subtly infuse* them in the consciousness of the actors.

Apart from the CEO's listening to the backtalk and understanding of the other, he also engages in elevating his understanding of the company's role in changing the industry. This means that GRAPHICS's strong consciousness of their own CSR work forms the basis for their endeavours to transpose CSR values and requirements to suppliers through a form of education:

We try to tell them how they should work with CSR and its principles … in order for us to have similar expectations. We do not educate a designer; we do not educate a printer. Their skills − we are deeply dependent on the fact that they are extremely gifted in their own profession. (CEO).

They have paid for the certification themselves. But I've done all the homework and shared it with them, and told them about the advantages for them … We share our system with them and tell them how we do it, and importantly they can also see the benefits. (CEO).

This process happens out of respect for the other's knowledge, skills, and values. Thus, the CEO recognises that 'they are extremely gifted in their own profession and … they can also see the benefits'. The community's growth is due to the interplay between GRAPHICS managers' willingness to share knowledge and involve themselves wholeheartedly in suppliers' education and the CSR certification process. Their endeavours to understand the others' perspectives are motivated by the mutual contribution to common values, not just to the results.

A relational space of mutual understanding between the CEO and his suppliers is substantiated and nursed through ongoing dialogue:

We have really good collaboration with a printer in southern Jutland whom we have helped get certified … It has been an ongoing dialogue … how much time does it take, what does it entail, how difficult is it, is it expensive? Then we supply our knowledge about the things we know from our own experience, and I share my understanding of what the challenges are in their case and also what possibilities it makes for them. (CEO).

We have an ongoing dialogue with our suppliers about certification, its content and how to do it … We would like to educate them — communicating our values is a continuous effort. (CEO).

The ongoing dialogue makes it possible to obtain an empathic understanding of, and to have an impact on, suppliers, as well as allowing CSR principles to infuse the practices and the approach to other forms of business management.

Overall, the manager is *reflective and empathic* in how he relates to his suppliers, as well as playing an important role within the larger evolution of the quality management and CSR field. The following quote shows that the manager has the capacity to transcend the wider context, thus allowing him to move beyond his sociocultural origins and produce new relationships and ways of being.

What we do is supposed to be regarded as helping them move on further by themselves, like the help I got a hundred years ago regarding the quality management system … And the different printers have their different approaches and certifications [to CSR] that they are now nursing … and they see the advantage of nursing them. They make good use of it in respect to other customers too … They have been able to approach other types of clients such as municipalities, which they did not previously. (CEO).

Through his empathic way of relating to others, the CEO encourages his suppliers to become proactive, shifting from a practical-evaluative-dominated agency mode towards a projective one. Hence, the manager does not see himself in, nor does he pursue, the role of leader within the network driving the community, but rather creates an environment in which he can facilitate and guide others in growing and enacting the values of CSR that flow within the network. Through his behaviour he shows a deep comprehension of the relational nature of the field, striving to create a space for collaborative agency, rather than controlling others' actions. He enacts his value system not through direct, punctual intervention in the field, but by creating the space in which others are enacting it. As he states: 'The longer one has been in it, the more it is there in your subconscious. That it is a way to act and do things.'

Accordingly, through his empathic way of relating to others and the institutional field, the institutional entrepreneur can acquire a profound understanding of the engagement, activities, and structural resources of multiple and disparate agencies in order to mould organisational practice into a coherent construct going in a specific direction. Hence, within a relational paradigm that builds on empathic engagement, the purposiveness of institutional work is achieved not necessarily by having high and powerful resources that neutralise existing institutional forces, but rather by using one's energy to direct organisational practice towards the desired end.

4.3. Conclusion on empirical exemplar

Throughout this case study we have shown that the institutional work of the GRAPHICS team, and its CEO in particular, is driven by the conscious intent to enlarge the field of sustainable graphics. It is this consciousness and motivation that transform the CEO's actions

from daily, pragmatic actions into institutional work with transitional impact. In other words, the CEO's actions are considered institutional by virtue of their intentionality, which is directed towards the field, and the ripple effects manifested at the field level. The growth of the network is realised through relations of interdependence between GRAPHICS and its suppliers and clients that form a fairly tightly bonded relational space infused by CSR principles.

The institutional work is governed by a deep understanding of the efforts and commitment elicited by the process of becoming part of the network. This is why, when engaging with suppliers, rather than demanding or imposing the value of sustainability through an approach of certainty, the CEO first gathers experiential knowledge about the other's realities and tries to accommodate their basic needs, so that they can partner subsequently and grow together. Learning about and screening suppliers is not done from a distance in a decoupled manner, but through empathic engagement with, for instance, the manager physically visiting the printing house and building a close and personal relationship with it characterised by an approach of listening to the backtalk, dialogue, and reflection. By understanding and influencing the other in this way, the CEO can emphasise and infuse the institutional field with characteristics that resonate with suppliers. Depending on the maturity and the context of suppliers, the CEO stresses financial sustainability, the growth perspective, or social and environmental sustainability in order to make the field relatable and to start the dialogue, which gradually leads to the suppliers adopting these practices and even becoming proactive promoters.

The CEO's orientation towards others' needs and their growth and maturity hold sway over relationship building. Suppliers embrace the sustainable ethos and become real actors in the field. Suppliers also set the scene for an interaction that can enlarge the portfolio of sustainable practices and strengthen the sustainability ethos.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Human actorhood and the knowledge system cannot be understood through rational cognitive processes alone. Affective processes form an important part of socialisation and call for attention to how individuals decide on actions. If the knowledge system crowds out human values, the relation to important aspects of the other is lost. The institutional literature has argued for the importance of affect (e.g. Weik, 2019), and this article conceptually integrates the affective dimension with institutional work through the concept of a reflective process.

5.1. Contributions

By conceptualising empathic engagement as the affective dimension of relational institutional work, and illustrating empirically how an institutional entrepreneur can nurture institutional change through empathic engagement, this article makes the following contributions.

First, it furthers understanding of the nature of relational ties invoked to foster institutional change, especially the affective dimension of relational ties. We argue that empathic engagement is central to institutional change because institutional entrepreneurs are reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983) who take a critical approach to the institutional world and maintain awareness of institutional influences on their norms, values, logics, and behaviour (Trenca, 2016a). This awareness enables institutional entrepreneurs to nurture permeability (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009) and empathic engagement (Knorr-Cetina, 2001) with other institutional worlds and actors, and gather ways of relating that become

valuable resources in orchestrating institutional work and co-creating institutional fields anew. The exemplar demonstrates an approach of inquiring rather than cohesion in relationships with suppliers; such inquiring represents a form of dialogue. The CEO has a cultivated self-awareness, where he works to resonate with the other to incite his suppliers to move in a more sustainable direction, despite unfavourable contexts, while at the same time remaining distinct from them, focusing both on the development of the institutional field and on his own business plan. This displays a high level of self-awareness and self-reflection that enables the CEO to transcend his own situatedness (Sugarman & Martin, 2011).

Second, sensitivity towards backtalk from inanimate materials (Schön, 1983) and humans (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009) induces the institutional entrepreneur to engage in inquiry with the other to agree on a course of action. The exemplar demonstrates how the CEO retains an openness towards his suppliers' situatedness and possibilities, which may interrupt 'business as usual'. Engaging in this manner is characterised by the interweaving of cognitive and affective processes.

Third, the exemplar shows that institutional work is a collective effort woven from the depths of the institutional field. Although the notion of institutional logic conveys mechanics or structuring principles, for actors to invest in the field they need to penetrate lived experiences. This is achieved through actors' affective processes, which typically resonate with those that are embedded in the institutional field. We argue that producing a profound impact on the field requires institutional work to build on empathic engagement that enables the creation of a community committed to a certain direction. This contrasts with arguments that institutional entrepreneurs must possess superhuman powers and unlimited resources to produce profound change (DiMaggio, 1988). There *is* a need for entrepreneurs with self-awareness and conscious intentionality to comprehend the institutional field as it is experienced by other actors and to steer matters strategically in line with existing structures.

Our findings contrast with the concept of the capable institutional actor (Voronov & Weber, 2016) who is the embodiment of the institutional world they inhabit (and thereby the representation of an institutional ethos, which becomes their *sole reality*). We illustrate how the CEO acts in relation to suppliers and their world in a way that infuses them unobtrusively with the CEO's own values and practices, making the institutional field relatable — something that resonates with suppliers, and something suppliers eventually embrace. Through empathic engagement, the institutional entrepreneur has the ability to inhabit the institutional world without becoming its embodiment. He is able to 'move' between institutional worlds. Through processes of visualising and inquiring, he can comprehend (at least partially) the 'becoming' of the respective world while at the same time envisioning its changes (or process of change). This is significant because it allows the institutional entrepreneur to achieve insights that allow him/her to cooperate and mobilise actors through relational agency.

Our findings confirm the ability of a focal actor to steer and engage stakeholders in cooperation. Similar to Fligstein's socially skilled actor, the entrepreneur can skilfully induce cooperation. However, the strategic ploys (Fligstein, 1997, 2001) are based on cognitive ability, whereas the concept of empathic engagement rests on affective and cognitive interwoven processes. Social skill hinges on strategically leveraging knowledge. Gaining the ability to skilfully steer and successfully evoke agency also rests in the actors' willingness and ability to act as an interdependent being, i.e. to accept a non-dualistic view of reality (Knorr-Cetina, 2001). Empathic engagement details the relational dimension of institutional work, as it highlights the dynamics between the individuating aspect, which establishes the actor as a specific focus of experience, and the participatory function, which situates them.

This paper also reflects on the purposiveness of institutional work, arguing that the conceptual border suggested within Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006, p. 215) definition is necessary from a research methodology perspective, and due to the definition's practical implications. In this case study all practices fulfilled their pragmatic scope; however, what drove institutional change was the deep anchoring of the CEO's intention to enlarge the field. Given an empathic mode of relating, the institutional entrepreneur obtained a profound understanding of the emerging field and his relational possibilities, which assisted him in orchestrating organisational practice towards a specific direction (Mitchell, Nielsen, Nørreklit, & Nørreklit, 2013). As such, with empathic engagement building on a relational approach, the purposefulness of institutional work is achieved not by necessarily having high and powerful resources that neutralise existing institutional forces, but rather by using their energies to direct the organisational practice towards the desired end. Moreover, such direction is achieved not through delegation but through orchestration, which is made possible by means of a social process with a high degree of involvement by multiple actors.

5.2. Generalisation and practical implications

Using the qualitative exemplar, we can conceptualise empathic engagement as a core dimension of the relational institutional work performed by an institutional entrepreneur. Concepts are by their nature inherently concerned with general perspectives (Nørreklit et al., 2016). However, it is not known how widely this empathic engagement approach is used, or whether it is possible to specify alternative approaches. Although this study is based on one case, it is reasonable to assume that the revealed approach can be applied to other situations (Nørreklit et al., 2016). The description of the organisational context of the case provides the reader with knowledge of the site. In this way, insight is provided into whether it is reasonable for the reader to assume whether 'generalization can, [or] cannot, be extended' to another setting (Payne & Williams, 2005, p. 310). Both broader investigation of empathic engagement and deeper understanding of how to conceptualise and develop the tools for undertaking it are needed.

The conceptual contributions of this study imply that empathic engagement can cultivate relational agency, and thus facilitate change and move suppliers in a common direction. Like reflexivity, empathy can be nurtured. Even if it can be practiced, the manner in which individuals convey empathy remains highly dependent on personal characteristics, such as emotional and aesthetic attitudes. Similar to developing a reflexive approach, nurturing empathic engagement does not appear to be a quick fix: practice work with managers has shown them to be incapable of reproducing reflective behaviours without guidance from a consultant (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009).

In situations of planned change coupling the tactical and operational levels with a sustainability transition may be ceremonial or uneven (Jamali, 2010). The lack of coupling to sustainability statements and standards has been conceptualised as a strategic response (Marquis, Toffel, & Zhou, 2016), uneven implementation may also pertain to differences in the manner in which various organisational units translate organisation strategy to local levels (Linneberg, Madsen, & Neilasen, 2019).

Committing to a sustainability transition makes little sense without the engagement of the supplier network. The transition to more sustainable organisational practices involves changes in the entire supply chain. For organisational managers, coherence across the supply chain can be created by means of control and audits; however, this article shows that cohesion is not the only important mechanism to ensure change in the supply chain. Focusing on

empathic engagement can facilitate closer and more trusting collaboration with suppliers. Empathic engagement can also assist in implementing sustainability values internally and in the value chain. With well-developed knowledge of the other's situatedness, an empathic engagement approach can nurture supplier relationships and convince organisational actors to embrace a sustainability transition.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2020.08.002.

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